Did the natural world go wrong?

Christopher Southgate

Abstract: This chapter considers a range of explanations of the disvalues in the non-human world. It goes on to explore how an explanation lacking a fall-event or rebellion against divine intentions can be integrated into a Christian narrative of creation and redemption.

Keywords: creation; evolution; suffering; original sin; theodicy; Fall; eschatology; atonement.

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It is both a pleasure and a great honour to contribute to this collection remembering Denis Edwards. Denis and I were at many meetings together, and his infallible courtesy and quiet kindness left a deep impression on me, as did his ever-humble, ever-searching enquiry into the things of God and the world. In August 2012 a group of us walked most of the way up a South African mountain – Denis making fine pace despite less than ideal equipment. Only when it came on to snow did he judiciously point out that we were without map, food or mobile phone and it might be wise to settle for reaching the waterfall. With Denis there was always wisdom and judiciousness, and there was always a waterfall – the healing torrent of his strong sense of the compassion of God and the strength of the Holy Spirit.

I want to honour Denis by picking up an old exchange of ours, and using it to develop my current thinking in dialogue with his work. Some years ago we were at a colloquium on ecological issues and a colleague remarked, almost in passing, that whatever formulations were attempted, there always had to be a fall-event at the centre of the narrative. Denis and I smiled quietly to one another, because in both our minds was a sense that the dominant Western Christian position - that a primal human sin disorders the whole creation - is no longer sustainable, and that an ecological theology must be developed out of an evolutionary narrative that can find no place for such a sudden, late-onset disordering of the cosmos into its Darwinian state.[1]

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[1] See Edwards, Denis, *The God of Evolution: a trinitarian theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) for a durable account of the possibilities and challenges of this sort of theology. Also Southgate, Christopher, 'Cosmic Evolution and Evil' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* ed. Chad Meister

Where then can lie the origin of the disvalues in a Darwinian creation - violence between creatures, suffering caused by predation, parasitism and disease, and the extinction of almost all species that have ever existed?[2] Michael Lloyd comes to the conclusion that the only satisfactory account is one based on the rebellion of angels before the creation of the present universe.[3] That account suffers from two major problems: first, the power that has to be accorded to the angels to frustrate the intentions of the Creator of all things *ex nihilo*; second, the inescapable scientific conclusion that it is the *same* process of evolution by natural selection that gives rise both to creaturely diversity, beauty, and ingenuity of adaptation and to the disvalues listed above.

Much more challenging for 'fall-free' accounts of an evolving creation[4] are the proposals of Neil Messer, invoking Barth's '*Das Nichtige*'[5] and Celia Deane-Drummond, drawing on Bulgakov's language of 'Shadow Sophia'.[6] Both invoke a mysterious constraint on divine activity in creation. A great deal turns on the nature of this constraint on God's capacity to create a world where there is creaturely flourishing without creaturely struggle, competition and violence. If the constraint is construed as a spiritual force, then old concerns that exercised the early Christian theologians about dualistic formulations resurface. A God who, from the beginning, has been in a battle with contrary spiritual forces powerful enough to radically alter

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and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 147-64. In this regard it is interesting to note Stanley Rosenberg's recent re-reading of Augustine, in which he suggests that Augustine's prelapsarian world, 'very good' and under the providence of the sovereign God, already includes thorns and poisonous snakes. It may not after all be necessary for Augustinians to perform somersaults in order to assign all apparent disvalues in creation to human sin. Rosenberg, Stanley, 'Can Nature be 'Red in Tooth and Claw' in the thought of Augustine?' in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin: Conversations on the Image of God, Original Sin, and the Problem of Evil* ed. Stanley Rosenberg, Michael Burdett, Michael Lloyd and Benno van den Toren (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), pp. 183-96.

[2] See Southgate, Christopher, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), Ch. 1, for a justification of this list.
[3] Lloyd, Michael, 'The Fallenness of Nature: Three Non-Human Suspects' in *Finding Ourselves after Darwin*, pp. 211-24.
[4] Such as Bethany Sollereder has formulated in her *God, Evolution and Animal Suffering: Theodicy without a Fall* (London: Routledge, 2018).
[5] Messer, Neil, *Science in Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, in press), see also his 'Evolution and Theodicy: How (Not) to do Science and Theology', *Zygon* 53(3) (2018): 821-35.
[6] Deane-Drummond, Celia, 'Perceiving Natural Evil through the Lens of Divine Glory?' *Zygon* 53(3) (2018): 792-807.

the character of any creation to which God might give rise, is no longer the sovereign Lord of the cosmos whose ontological priority and absolute goodness guarantees the goodness of creation. If on the other hand the constraint on God's creative action is not an opposing agency but some form of logical constraint, how can the logic be demonstrated?[7]

I identify a spectrum of formulations in the recent literature. Lloyd's angelic fall sits at one end of the spectrum, as the position most explicitly informed by a sense of the rebellion of identifiable freely-choosing beings. Next I would place Nicola Hoggard Creegan, for whom the disvalues in creation are like the 'tares' in the parable of the wheat and the tares in the Gospel of Matthew (Mt. 13.24-30KJV).[8] The appearance of the tares of disvalue is ultimately mysterious, but the parable's witness that they are sown by an 'enemy' (Mt. 13.25), suggests that Hoggard Creegan too invokes a consciously rebellious force.

In the middle of our spectrum we might place Messer, working from Barth, and Deane-Drummond, working from Bulgakov. The constraint on God's perfect freedom is a mystery, not a conscious resistance. As I have suggested,[9] this position is metastable – when the appeal to mystery on which they rest is subject to closer questioning, these approaches would necessarily collapse either into a conscious opposing spiritual force, or a form of logical constraint.

Perhaps the instincts of Paul Fiddes belong next on our spectrum. Fiddes after a very careful analysis of the 'non-being' tradition, which he traces back to Plotinus, seeks to avoid the conclusion that natural evil is a logical necessity. He writes..

> Some overall vision of the 'responsiveness' and 'resistance' of creation to the Spirit of God is needed for a doctrine of creative evolution, for a proper theodicy, and certainly for the claim… that God suffers conflict with a non-being which is alien to him. It may be that process thought is pointing in a direction whose destination we do not yet have the conceptual tools to map..[10]

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[7] This is in effect Lloyd's challenge to me in his summary of the debate, *Finding Ourselves after Darwin*, p. 261.

[8] Hoggard Creegan, Nicola, 'Theodicy: A Response to Christopher Southgate, Zygon 53(3) (2018):808-20.

[9] Southgate, Christopher 'Response with a Select Bibliography', *Zygon* 53(3) (2018):909-30.

[10] Fiddes, Paul S., *The Creative Suffering of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 228.

For Fiddes the resistance is not logically necessary, nor is it malevolent, but it is inevitable.[11] One could place here also process theologians and others influenced by process thought such as John Haught.

At the far end of this spectrum of positions would be *a forthright acceptance that the world unfolding through the processes of Darwinian evolution is the world God intended to make.* The evolutionary theologian has a choice here. Is this decision of God's an unconstrained decision to create disvalue along with value? That would drive the interpreter of creation back towards an appeal to mystery, though also to texts in the Hebrew Bible such as 'See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand.' (Deut 32.39), 'The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.' (1. Sam. 2.6) and Deutero-Isaiah's description of God as the author of 'weal and woe alike' (Is. 45.7).

It is at least worth considering whether centuries of philosophical reflection on the doctrine of God have taken Christian thought too far from these formulations. They survive within liturgy in protest and lament after disaster, as I have recently explored.[12] They survive in a depersonalised form in the influential and persuasive thought of Wesley Wildman, with his appeal to an interreligious understanding of God as the (non-personal) ground of being.[13]

But for those who want to regard God as both 'not less than personal', in Philip Clayton's phrase,[14] and benevolent towards God's creatures (caring for every sparrow that falls, to use an image beloved of Denis Edwards[15]), the presumption must be that God's creation of disvalues results from an intrinsic constraint as to the field of possibilities in creation. Such a view would hold that if God could have created an alternative world with a balance of value against disvalue (actual or potential) tilted more in favour of value, God would have done so. Robin Attfield concludes that there is no

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[11] 'Not necessary but inevitable' is also a formulation to which Deane-Drummond is attracted, see 'Perceiving'.
[12] Southgate, Christopher, 'In spite of all this, we will yearn for you' in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: the practical theology of trauma* ed. Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla A. Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison (London: Routledge, 2020), Ch. 7.
[13] Wildman, Wesley J., *In our own Image: Anthropomorphism, Apophaticism and Ultimacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[14] Clayton, Philip and Knapp, Steven, *The Predicament of Belief: science, philosophy, faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 22.

[15] Edwards, Denis, 'Every Sparrow that Falls: The Cost of Evolution and the Christ-Event', *Ecotheology* 11(1) (2006):103-123.

evidence that such an alternative world exists.[16] Robert Russell is concerned that it might, and therein lies his concern about putting too much weight on the 'only way' argument – that the evolutionary process was the only, or at least the optimal, way to give rise to the array of values we observe in the world (including those past values now disappeared).[17] But this concern of Russell's seems to me to underrate the force of the argument from God's benevolence.

Two other formulations of fallenness should be noted at this point. Ernst Conradie in his careful and ecologically aware explorations of the doctrine of sin explores the possibility of a 'minimalist' version of the Fall. He writes of a position that would hold that:

> things may not be perfect, but that this is the best that could be expected. This is a modification of Leibniz's best of all possible worlds argument, now framed in evolutionary history as an upward trajectory from brutish savages to civilised common humanity. While this view is quite common, it does not exclude a critique of the present in the sense that moral progress could have been further advanced than it is.[18]

This for Conradie would be the minimum basis for a discussion of the way the world is. Note the careful language – things could have been better than they now are. Compare this with Ted Peters, in a response to my recent reflections on divine glory. Peters says this:

> The more coherent route, in my judgment, is the one taken by [those]… who synthesize creation with redemption. Accordingly, the suffering we see in the disvaluing of evolutionary processes are signs of the world's alienation, estrangement, fallenness. One need not locate Adam and Eve in biological history to recognize that the world within which we live is not the creation promised in biblical symbols such as the Peaceable Kingdom or the New Creation. What is broken needs repair. What is alien needs to be brought home. What is estranged needs to be reconciled. What hurts needs to be healed. Only when redeemed, will our world be created.[19]

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[16] Attfield, Robin, *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), Ch. 7.
[17] Russell, Robert J., 'Southgate's Compound Only-Way Evolutionary Theodicy: Deep Appreciation and Further Directions', *Zygon* 53(3) (2018):711-26.

[18] Conradie, Ernst, unpublished paper, quoted with permission.

[19] Peters, Ted, 'Evolution, Suffering and Redemption: Sollereder, Southgate, and Russell on Theodicy' *Theology and Science*, 17(2) (2019): 195-208.

Note the language here: alienation, estrangement, brokenness - familiar imagery to describe the view not just that 'things could be better than they are' but that 'the world is broken'.

However, I contend that the creation as it has evolved over billions of years has been full of values of actual or potential beauty, creativity and ingenuity, full too of creaturely flourishing, accompanied by the competition, suffering and extinction that *necessarily* accompanies those values in a Darwinian world. *Much about the human world has 'gone wrong' and manifested alienation, estrangement and brokenness, but the non-human world, while it manifests great disvalue in the form of creaturely suffering and extinction, does not manifest alienation or brokenness, except where humans have begun to inflict irreversible damage upon it.*

This view, then, supposes that there is a decisive difference between self-conscious, freely-chosen acts of selfishness, violence, and cruelty, humans knowing the right and choosing to resist it, and the instinctive behaviours of other animals. So the classic single-act version of original sin can be modified to suggest that the multiplication of those conscious wrongs over time acts as a cumulative drag on the human spirit. Has the Fall thereby returned to the centre of the narrative? No, because this accumulation of human choices develops only towards the very end of the history of the natural world up to the present, and does not affect the fundamental character of that world.

Peters however slips into that so tempting view that the disvalues in evolution show that something went wrong with the divine plan, and he calls as witnesses Barth's *Nichtige* and Tillich's 'resistance of non-being'.[20] I note above that it is not clear what these resistances amount to, but if they are powerful enough to frustrate God's plan they pose severe problems for the Christian confession of a God who made absolutely everything out of absolutely nothing. Denis Edwards' own instincts are I believe more secure here. He writes: *'*The divine act of creation can be understood as an act of love, by which the trinitarian Persons freely make space for creation *and freely accept the limits of the process.'*[21]

This is a very important formulation, freeing us as it does both from the picture of God frustrated at not being able to create straw-eating lions,[22] and the cosmic-sadist caricatures of the God of evolution offered by atheist commentators.[23]

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[20] Peters, Ted, personal communication.
[21] Edwards, *God of Evolution*, pp. 41-2, italics mine.
[22] Southgate, Christopher, 'Re-reading Genesis, John and Job: a Christian's response to Darwinism', *Zygon* 46(2) (2011):370-95.
[23] E.g. David L. Hull in 'The God of the Galapagos', calling the God of evolution 'careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical'. *Nature* 352 (August 1992):485-6.

Nevertheless Peters identifies a key point. The most important challenge for new formulations of evolutionary theology is not to try and rescue some form of 'mysterious fallenness' to account for the apparent 'alienation' of the natural world, but rather to look at the Christian narrative afresh on the basis that this is indeed the sort of world God intended to create. How then is the drama of redemption to be set in register with that understanding of creation? I believe that that is the sort of quest Denis Edwards would have strongly endorsed and I am glad to be pursuing it in his memory.

In a review of my recent work, Jonathan Chappel comments that:

> [t[he fact that creation requires 'redemption' surely undermines Southgate's claim that the world as we see it now is as God originally intended it to be. For, if nothing has ever 'gone wrong' with creation, why does it need Christ to 'redeem' it? Is Christ 'saving' the world from the negative consequences of the system that He (as God) originally put in place? And why should humans strive to act in non-violent ways, when the use of violence has been sanctioned by God Himself?[24]

Here we see well expressed the other aspect of the work that Fall-events do in so much Christian theology. Not only do they give accounts of a world apparently alienated from God, but they also explain the necessity of the rescue act that God performs in the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection of Christ. So a necessary element of a 'fall-free' theology is a different type of formulation of the whole Christian narrative.

On a fall-event-based scheme, sin and evil frustrate God's attempt to create heaven (as symbolised by the myth of Eden). Jesus' death and resurrection, by one of the mechanisms postulated in centuries of reflection on the atonement, breaks the opposing power and makes possible the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1.20). On a fall-free scheme, in which God creates, under constraint, the only sort of world capable of realising the values God desires, a world that is not 'broken', it is harder at first sight to see what work the Christ-event is doing.

On this I take the view, which goes back at least to the twelfth century,[25] that the Incarnation can be thought of not as a rescue act of a wholly corrupted world but as planned by God from 'before the foundation of the world' (cf. Rev. 13.8) to make possible a new stage in the unfolding of the divine plan. The exact role of Christ's atoning work on the Cross remains an area of major debate.[26] But my approach finds a place for two profoundly important models. First for Christ's example of utterly free human action,

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[24] Chappel, Jonathan, 'Review of *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing*', *Science and Christian Belief* 31(2) (2019): 213-6, quotation on 215.
[25] So Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: the coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Ch. 7.
[26] Importantly added to by Eleanore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

free because unconstrained by anything but the paths of love, and therefore truly 'the image of God' (2. Cor. 4.4), as the model for all human growth into freedom. Second, for Christ's Cross and Resurrection as the triumph over 'the powers' (Rom. 8.38; Col. 1.16; Eph. 6.12), or 'Sin' (Rom. 3.9; 5.21), which derive their influence over human action precisely from myriad un-free choices made by human beings over the millennia.[27]

Such a new formulation is also needed to answer what Robert Russell, writing about my compound theodicy, identifies as the most difficult and underexplored question raised by my approach, 'why did God not just create heaven?'[28] If God can give rise, eventually, to a reconciled and suffering-free creation, why did God not simply do so without the need for myriad instances of creaturely suffering? And as Russell and I both acknowledge,[29] there is a danger of such a scheme as mine seeming 'broken-backed', indeed crypto-Gnostic, in that the first creation is seen as flawed, such that it needs to be escaped from into a heavenly realm of existence.[30] This is precisely what the early Christian theologians sought to reject in their insistence on a 'very good' creation *ex nihilo*, and, as the logical culmination of that position, original sin as the source of all disvalue.

Russell picks up on my response to this problem, which is that 'our guess must be that though heaven can eternally preserve those [creaturely] selves, subsisting in suffering-free relationship, it could not give rise to them in the first place.'[31] In other words, the 'only way' argument needs to be boldly extended. An *eventual* reconciled cosmos required the era of struggle and suffering that is the first or 'old' creation, in order that it might give rise to the creaturely selves that can undergo transformation.

Russell refers to this as 'the "heaven requires earth" argument' and continues:

> 'I believe it is an *essential* , and not just an ancillary, argument to Southgate's overall theodicy… with this new element, Southgate's theodicy insists that "heaven and earth" are held together as the domain of God's creating and redeeming Spirit in which "all will be well."…"Heaven requires earth" is, as best I know, an almost unique

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[27] I would also want to include a sense of God's taking personal, and infinitely costly, responsibility for the disvalues in creation. See Southgate, *Groaning*, Ch. 4, and Young, Frances, *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 247.

[28] Russell, Robert J., 'Moving ahead on Christopher Southgate's Evolutionary Theodicy', *Theology and Science* 17(2) (2019): 185-94.
[29] Russell. 'Moving Ahead'; Southgate, Christopher, *Theology in a Suffering World: Glory and Longing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.
[30] Russell' 'Moving Ahead'.

[31] Southgate, *Groaning*, p. 90.

> insight in the field of natural theodicy, and in natural and moral theodicy as a whole. It's extraordinarily profound yet utterly simple claim is, to me at least, astonishing, liberating, and compelling… I suggest … the seventh argument "heaven requires earth" brings a deeper, more satisfying, and coherent completion to Southgate's "only way" approach to evolutionary theodicy..'[32]

Another aspect of this extension of the 'only way' argument is that one of the values that (it may be presumed) God desires the old creation to possess is 'redeemability'.[33] The evolved world has to be such that an event starting with an incarnation of the divine Word could inaugurate a process of transformation leading to a new creation in which God 'will be all in all' (1. Cor. 15.28).

Given the difficulty of formulating an account of the *origins* of disvalue in the natural world, it is not surprising that a range of figures emphasise instead eschatology, God's ultimate redemptive purposes for this world. Four examples (differently motivated) are Russell;[34] Peters;[35] Edwards;[36] and Messer.[37]

Here again we can see a range of views of the transition by which God will give rise to the eschaton. There would be those who would emphasise the apocalyptic passages in the New Testament (especially in the Synoptics and Revelation) to insist that God's consummating action, God's final struggle with the powers leading the Last Judgment, will be sudden and soon. A period of terrible and bitter struggle gives way rapidly to the Parousia. The opposite emphasis would be found in those process thinkers who see the long persuasive work of God on the panpsychic flow of events in the universe as stretching out into the future with no dramatic transformation at all, perhaps not even any guarantee of the ultimate triumph of good over evil. John Haught has eloquently combined insights from process thought with the influence of Teilhard de Chardin in insisting that it is early days in the universe project. No dramatic transformation is in immediate view, only

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[32] Russell, 'Moving Ahead'.
[33] Russell, Robert J., *Cosmology: from alpha to omega* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 308 check.
[34] On the basis that only eschatological redemption can guarantee a satisfactory theodicy. Russell, *Cosmology*, Ch. 8.
[35] Out of his sense of the ontological priority of the future, see Peters, Ted, *God: the world's future DETAILS*
[36] Because of his very strong sense of the compassion of God for all creatures. Edwards, 'Every Sparrow'.
[37] I include him because he emphasises the eschatological vision of Isaiah 11 as indicative of the true purposes of God, and therefore rejects any view in which God is the author of violence within creation. Messer, Neil, 'Natural Evil after Darwin' in *Theology after Darwin* ed. Michael Northcott and R.J. Berry (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2009), pp. 139-54.

the slow outworking of the divine purpose towards a greater 'rightness'. Haught writes,

> Theologically speaking, creation is still awakening—haltingly and not without setbacks—to rightness. The newly emergent sensitivity to life's suffering… is all part of a single narrative of cosmic awakening. This recent conscious awakening to rightness must be taken into account whenever we ask what the universe is really all about.[38]

For Russell, as also for John Polkinghorne, the transformation to a final harmonious state must be radical, because it involves the instantiation of new laws of nature, or a new destiny for matter (of which the Resurrection of Jesus may be seen as the prolepsis).[39] Working as much from the considerations of physics as of theology, they argue that the transformation will involve profound elements of discontinuity with the present ordering of the universe.[40] Russell has laid particular stress on the second law of thermodynamics as the physical principle that would need to be transformed if there is to be a state from which all struggle has been eliminated. In an analogous way Jürgen Moltmann has argued that evolution must stand in need of redeeming transformation, explicitly criticising both Teilhard and Rahner for supposing that evolutionary processes can lead to the eschaton.[41]

Denis Edwards, following Rahner rather than Moltmann, wants to insist that the divine transformation of the cosmos will be as gradual as possible.[42] This I take to be because of Denis's emphasis (characteristic of an ecotheologian as opposed to a theologian of physics) on the immanent presence of God in the world, informing all its processes, also perhaps because of his desire to retain an evolutionary unity to the overall narrative.

My own position wants to combine different elements from across this spectrum of views. On the one hand, my scientific training tells me that Russell and Polkinghorne must be correct that the ultimate transformation of the fabric of the universe must be a radical one. On the other hand Edwards must be right in insisting that this transformation is not wrought by a God who is altogether 'outside' the cosmos, but rather by a God who immanently empowers its processes while all the while longing for the time when this immanence will acquire a new dimension – God 'all in all'.

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[38] Haught, John, 'Faith and Compassion in an Unfinished Universe', *Zygon* 53(3) (2018):782-91, quotation on 789.
[39] Russell, *Cosmology* Chs 9-10; Polkinghorne, John, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (London: SPCK, 2002).
[40] See e.g. Russell, Cosmology, Ch. 10.
[41] Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* transl. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1990), pp. 292-305.
[42] Edwards, Denis, *The God Who Acts: Creation, Redemption and Special Divine Action* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), pp. 155-9.

Haught is right to stress, with process thinkers, the long patience of God as the universe unfolds. And I have sympathy too with the much-criticized thought of Teilhard when he pictures a 'noösphere' in which human intelligence floods the world and is everywhere influential, as the penultimate state of the creation.[43] The terrible current consequences of this extent of human influence, dramatically illustrated by plastic in the oceans and the intensification of hurricanes and forest fires by anthropogenic climate change, need no elaboration here. But I have long been struck by St Paul's extraordinary insight in Rom. 8.19-22, that the current state of the creation, groaning in the labour pains of the birthing of something beyond the present, awaits 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (v.21NRSV).

This can be read as suggesting that the interim phase in the eschatological redemption of all things, the phase preceding the final radical transformation involving the laws of physics themselves, is a phase most to do with the transformation of the human spirit, the discovery in human beings of what true freedom consists of. For that the non-human creation is made to wait.

So for all the importance of the 'deep incarnation movement', starting with the work of Niels Gregersen and taken forward by Denis Edwards in his last writings – for all the importance of Christ's identification with 'all flesh', indeed all matter - the crucial influence of incarnation and atonement on the Christian narrative proves to be on human beings. A fine and precious thread of authentic, Christ-like freedom is offered whereby humans can be led out of the labyrinth of limit, guilt and shame that has so characterised human experience.[44]

This is, as Edwards has so importantly emphasised, the work not of some magical-miracle-working external God, but of the immanent Spirit. Here I am able to make a link with Denis's most recent writing. It is gratifying that his 'theological response' (rather than 'theodicy') in respect of the problem of evolution includes many of the same elements as mine. And when Denis demurs from the 'only way' argument as the first step in the construction of an evolutionary theodicy, he makes in effect the same step as I make in my most recent reflection on the subject, admitting a greater element of negative theology into the response to suffering, and therefore making a less bold theodical response.[45] I agree with Denis moreover that the heart of the

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[43] I bracket out considerations of extraterrestrial civilisations and their possible need for redemption. As we still lack any evidence that these exist, I frame my theology for the present in terms of what we do know about the cosmos.

[44] Cf. Fiddes, Paul S., *Freedom and Limit: a dialogue between literature and Christian doctrine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991); also Stump, *Atonement*.

[45] Edwards, Denis, *Deep Incarnation* (Australian Theological Forum, forthcoming); Southgate, Christopher, *Theology in a Suffering World*, pp. 3-4.

human vocation in Spirit-given freedom must be that '[h]uman beings are called to participate in God's love and action towards the wider creation in an ecological commitment to the healing and flourishing of the planetary community of life'.[46] The terrible urgency of this is now all too clear, and tragically evident in Denis's own land of Australia, in the grip as I write this of catastrophic mega-fires.

To summarise then, the shape of this Christian story in dialogue with evolution is as follows:

There have been three great phases in God's action in the world. First, the creating, sustaining, and protecting from ultimate catastrophe of the 'old creation', which operates with the physical laws with which we are familiar, and the biological process of Darwinian evolution. Among the products of this process are self-conscious freely-choosing organisms with an (admittedly flawed) God-consciousness, *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*. Humans, evolving in a vastly long (and necessary) evolutionary process, and inheriting from their evolution a mixture of drives including both the altruistic and the cruel, violent and selfish, could have their freedom of will brought to authentic fruition only by the second of God's great actions.

In this, God offered out of pure self-giving love the perfect example of the Incarnate Son. That example, and the Son's victory, through pure persistence in his Passion and divine deliverance in his Resurrection, over the powers of sin and death, transforms the scope of human possibility. However, the transformation of the world, though profound, is not immediately apparent. The processes of the old creation go on. Christ's victory has to grow 'soul by soul and silently' in the long process by which the intensified immanence of the Spirit[47] works with human wills to make that authentic freedom a reality. And that enigmatic Pauline passage from Rom. 8 on which I have drawn suggests that, for whatever reason in the mystery of the divine economy, the radical transformation of the cosmos by which it will attain its final harmonious state, awaits this human growth into freedom, 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God'.

Only then, so this model supposes, will come the third great action of God, the radical transformation of the physical universe, some laws retained and others, such as the second law of thermodynamics, suspended, such that (resurrected) bodily existence is possible without suffering or struggle. In this final state God is present to creatures in a yet more intense way, but without depriving them of individuality.

Note that the second phase is impossible without the first, and the third without the second. This is a narrative without a human fall from perfection as the source of all creaturely suffering. But I suggest that it is at least as consistent with Scripture and reason as the classic U-shaped evangel of the

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[46] Edwards, *Deep Incarnation*.
[47] Made possible by the Christ-event, and by the Resurrection and Ascension, cf. Jn 16.7.

Western tradition. It belongs within a family of such positions to which Denis Edwards' work has been and will continue to be a distinguished contribution. I am deeply thankful to have known him.